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ABSTRACT

In North Carolina, legislation giving health insurance to children of modest-income working families was won because a broad coalition of over 100 organizations got the attention of lawmakers. Because all children benefitted, rural children benefited, but a few groups pushing for health insurance for just rural children would not have gotten their agenda passed. When thinking beyond individual issues such as the economy, health care, or education, it can be seen that they are a means to an end. The end is what needs to be focused on, and that is the well-being of children. Recommendations for achieving that end include: (1) putting aside personal and professional egos and narrow organizational agendas and becoming deeply involved in broad, unprecedented, seemingly unlikely political coalitions; (2) redefining the goal as making the community, region, state, or province a better place in which to be a child and to raise a child, because by establishing the primacy of child well-being, the mother of all paradigm shifts will have been made, which will encompass all other individual issues; and (3) making sure that a good outcome actually is achieved, instead of simply posturing or giving a good try. The real divide in the world is not between urban and rural, it is between the powerful and the marginalized. Collectively, people have a degree of power that they cannot ever have individually or in their own little areas. Helping all children helps not only rural kids, but also rural communities and rural economies. (TD)

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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Jonathan P. Sher, USA

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

"Connecting Rural School Reform and Rural Child Advocacy

Jonathan P. Sher, USA

Greetings to the brave, the few and the hearty who stayed until the bittersweet end. I will start my remarks with a thank you. It's a thank you to Jim Montgomery, as the organizer of this conference; To Mike, as his dean who supported him strongly, and, to all the other Malaspina staff members and students who have made this event possible.

I very rarely go to conferences anymore. perhaps that's because I'm very rarely invited to conferences anymore! Be that as it may, I wanted to come to this one, and it has turned out in many ways to be an even better experience than I was hoping for and anticipating. First-rate international conferences like this don't happen by accident, and so, before the afternoon peters away, I'd like to ask everybody to join me in thanking our conference host for making this experience possible. [wild and prolonged applause ensued]

I know this is a conference about rural education and development. but, i would prefer to start by sharing a tale with you from long ago and far away. I want to tell you the story about an evil king who wanted to get rid of all the Jews in his kingdom, not just the rural ones, but all the Jews. Persecuting the Jews, even then, was not a new idea. however, this king came up with a novel method get rid of them. He decided that he personally would challenge a representative from the Jewish community to a debate – in fact, a debate in sign language! The King Proclaimed: "I'm going to make three signs and if your representative can read those signs accurately and answer them correctly, your people can stay and live here in peace in my kingdom. But, if the responses are wrong, all the Jews must leave my kingdom immediately and permanently. As you can imagine, this caused enormous upset in the Jewish community. They asked themselves, "What are we going to do?" For two days, they discussed and fussed and still didn't have a plan.

Finally, Yonkel, the little man who ran the chicken shop said: " enough! I'll debate the King and it will turn out okay. Trust me."

So, it's the day of the debate. There's a platform in the center of the royal court and the King and Yonkel are there. The King throws out his hand with his fingers outstretched. In response, Yonkel holds up one fist. The King says, "That is amazing. You got it right." Then, the King quickly points two fingers directly at Yonkel's face. Yonkel reacts by swiftly lifting one finger in front of his own nose. The King again is astonished and states: "You've read my second sign correctly and you've answered it correctly." Finally, the King reaches into his royal cloak and pulls out a piece of old, moldy cheese. Yonkel looks at him, shrugs, reaches into his pocket. And pulls out an egg. The King says, " I don't believe it. You've done it. You've read all three of my signs correctly and responded perfectly. Your people get to stay, to live in peace, to thrive and to prosper. You always will be welcome here while I'm King."

That night in the royal court, all the powerful people around the King said, "Your Highness, we saw the debate, but we don't really understand. Could you explain to us what happened? The King replied, "You know it's the most amazing thing. I never thought any of the Jews could figure it out, let alone Yonkel the chicken man. I spread out my fingers to show that the Jewish people were dispersed all over the world and were weak in their isolation. Yonkel held up one fist to show that the Jewish people were strong and united in the hand of God. A wonderful answer. Then, I raised two fingers to signal that there are two Kings -- the King on earth and the King in heaven. But Yonkel raised only one finger straight up to indicate that there is only one King, the King in heaven. Last, I pulled a piece of rotten cheese out of my cloak to symbolize that the Jewish religion and the Jewish culture had grown stale and moldy. Yet, Yonkel, that Yonkel, calmly reached into his pocket and pulled out an egg – the best symbol of wholeness, perfection and the new life. What brilliant answers to the sign language questions i posed. i had no choice but to concede defeat and allow the Jews to remain here."

Meanwhile, that same night, everyone in the Jewish community is gathered at Yonkel's chicken shop. They're cheering and shouting "Mazel tov" and other congratulations. when they calm down, they turn and ask: "So, Yonkel, what was that all about? We're glad you won, but we don't understand. what happened in the debate". Yonkel shrugs and admits: "To tell you the truth, it really wasn't much of a debate. First, the king sticks his hand out like he's going to slap me, so I put up my fist to defend myself. Second, he goes to poke out my eyes with his two fingers and so, I lift up my one finger to block it. by then, I guess he knows I'm not going to just run away, so he takes out some cheese for a lunch break and I take my egg out to have lunch, too!

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I love that story. It's actually a microcosm of the history of Jewish people. There's a joke among Jewish people that all the Jewish religious holidays are variations on one theme:. They tried to wipe us out – we survived – let's eat! But, how is it connected to this conference and its theme?

For me the connection is that if we're talking about Jews, or we're talking about indigenous people, or we're talking about many rural people, we're actually talking about peoples and communities that have been marginalized, discriminated against, harmed and persecuted. These populations do not, by and large, have a history of being beloved, respected, understood and assisted by "the powers that be" in their time and place. Yet, they are all people, communities and cultures that have survived.

Sometimes they've survived by luck, sometimes by hard work, sometimes by cleverness and who knows, maybe even by the grace of God. For me the lesson of the Yonkel story is that sometimes survival is facilitated by *misunderstandings* Yonkel would not have been wise to go to the King and explain his version of what happened during the sign language debate.

In the rural context, I have seen the same phenomenon. There are times when the bucolic view of rurality --the nostalgic, romantic view -- leads policymakers to treat rural areas in ways that end up being beneficial. They do the right things for the wrong reasons. I personally have no doubt that rural people, rural communities, rural economies, and rural cultures will survive not only this decade, not only this century, but for as far into human history as we're going to go as a species. They will survive . . . And they will change.

This Conference has given me enormous hope and reinforced by conviction about the ability and likelihood of rural people, rural communities, rural economies, rural cultures and rural schools, surviving -- and occasionally thriving. It's been heartening for somebody who's been in this field for 30 years to see so many new people who care so deeply and who are contributing so much that's new and valuable and worth. It's a delight to know that the struggle will continue and will be in good hands.

Yet, it's been a particular pleasure to catch up with some of my old colleagues and friends; people with whom I've worked on and off for at least a decade and in some cases for more than a quarter of a century. What I've learned is that the work that we only talked about 25 years ago now has become real. Work that represented a set of hopes and dreams and wishes about what *could* happen has, in fact, happened. Just look at the extraordinary work that old friends like John Bryden, Ray Barnhardt, Tom Tiller (as the successor to my even older Norwegian colleague Karl Jan Solstad, David Mcswan, Jack Shelton, Paul Nachtigal and Toni Haas have accomplished. They have been incredibly persistent. The key to making those wishes, dreams, hopes and aspirations coming true has been their willingness to stick with fundamentally sound ideas, to stick with a set of honorable principles, to stick with a set of convictions about the basic goodness of rural people and communities – and to stick with a fundamental sense of hope and possibility. I am deeply impressed by what I've seen and heard in all of those cases.

Ray Barnhardt had to return earlier to Alaska, so I'll make him blush in absentia. I remember conversations three decades ago with Ray talking about how important it is and how it would be a great thing if we were ever able to merge indigenous and western ways of knowing and teaching. And, we discussed how great it would be if we went beyond the rhetoric of saying that rural communities could become uniquely wonderful learning labs, if only we took advantage of their advantages and honored their rurality. Ray is an example (and there are many others in this room) who successfully made the transition from saying "wouldn't it be nice" to being the catalyst making it actually happen. I admire that perseverance and dedication enormously. It gives me tremendous hope that we can, and will, continue to have genuinely rural schools, genuinely good schools, and genuinely strong rural communities and economies. All the people that I've mentioned have over a period of years "gone deep". They've had an idea and gone very deep into the development and refinement of that work until success was achieved. Now the challenge is sustainability..

In contrast to these deep colleagues, I've gone "wide". That's not just a physical reference! I have had experience in community economic development, entrepreneurship, education planning/research and rural school improvement. Some here might say that I've abandoned my rural work and no longer do anything that's of real relevance to the issues and actions at the heart of this Conference. For the past 4 and a half years, I've headed a state level child advocacy organization. It's not a rural child advocacy organization. It's not a rural education institute. It's not a rural studies center. It is a child advocacy organization trying to be of benefit to all 1.8 million children in my state, North Carolina.

Child advocacy basically comes in 3 flavours. The first is legal advocacy, i.e., attorneys who file class action law suits on behalf of children in bad circumstances as a way of using the legal system to try to bring about needed changes. The second kind of child advocacy is individual child advocacy. I work closely with a number of organizations around our state that take individual cases of children who have gotten into trouble, children who are not being helped in the ways that they need and these groups have been the voice for those children, trying to sort out their individual problems, their individual needs

and resolve their individual cases. Instead, I do the third type of child advocacy – namely, public policy research, education campaigns and lobbying. In our context, this largely involves influencing state government and state lawmakers to do more good things *for* children/youth and fewer bad things *to* them. I've been involved with issues of juvenile justice and delinquency prevention, child abuse and neglect, foster parent, adoption, child fatalities, child and adolescent health/safety issues, and early childhood education. It's been an incredible learning experience and a very steep learning curve for me. I want to share with you a couple of highlights of this work because there are lessons for all of us who care deeply about rural people and rural communities.

The single best thing has been helping to create a coalition called the Covenant with North Carolina's Children. It's a coalition of more than 100 separate organizations. Members range from broad civic organizations such as Kiwanis Clubs to virtually every association of child-related professionals from the pediatricians to the school nurses, to the social workers, to the teachers and, of course, local child advocacy groups. One hundred organizations that have a combined membership of one-half million people in a state of 7.5 million people. That's a significant coalition. Half a million people gets you noticed in political circles. All these organizations coming together to create a coherent agenda and to fight for that agenda is able to make changes that no individual member group ever was able to make on its own; working in isolation from one another.

For example, in 1998, the Covenant with North Carolina's Children was instrumental in persuading the governor to call a special session of the state legislature that would deal with one issue and one issue only: child health insurance for modest-income working families. The details are not important here. Please visit our website: www.ncchild.org, if you want to learn more. We helped make the case, get the legislation passed and $25 million allocated (that drew down $75 million in matching federal funds). For our purposes today, what was important was the coming together of unlikely allies and the active advocacy of groups for action beyond their traditional turf. Thus, the teachers' association for the first time used its influence to promote a child health initiative, not just better salaries and benefits for teachers. The strength in unity never was more apparent.

It's now 18 months since that legislation passed and because of the hard work on a lot of organization's parts, there are 90,000 kids who can now go to the doctor and to the dentist for the first time in their lives. More than 10,000 children have received needed eyeglasses for the first time in their lives. We expect these children to succeed more fully in school, now that they can see their books and the blackboard! That seems to me like work worth doing.

[I do have to note that I go back and forth between feeling delighted at this progress and embarrassed that at the dawn of a mew millennium in the richest nation on earth, we still have tens of thousands of children for whom basic access to basic health care was not a "given.". But, we all must start from where we truly are.]

Here is the eminently practical, transferable, political lesson for all of us at this Conference. The creation of North Carolina Health Choice was a fight for children throughout our state (rural, suburban and urban) – not a fight just for rural children. It was about the fundamental right of all children to have access to decent medical and dental care. Once that right was established, once that principle was accepted, all of the eligible rural kids automatically became included. Tens of thousands of modest-income rural kids in our state got a huge benefit they never would have gotten, *if we had fought for it only as a rural issue*. It was precisely the breadth of the issue and the inclusion of a broader-than-rural constituency that made it politically-feasible for rural kids to benefit.

What I've learned by going wide, instead of deep, might be relevant to the goals of the Conference. It might be relevant to the emerging, much-needed international association that's forming and moving forward here today. The most important lesson – the heart of my message today -- is, "it's about the children." When President Clinton was elected in the United States, his basic campaign message was: "it's about the economy, stupid." You can call me stupid, but I don't think it is about the economy. From this point forward, it's not about the economy, it's not about education, it's not about health care, per se. It's not about community development, per se. It's not about improved access and delivery of services per se. All of those things are important, but they are primarily a means to an end. The end is what we have to keep focused on. We need to keep our eyes on one prize: the well-being of children.

This is not as obvious a truth as it may seem. The dirty little secret in many of our societies, is that children and youth are not respected, not loved as they should be, not nurtured as they ought to be. In fact there are way too many children who are having seriously bad, seriously unhealthy, childhoods. It's wrong – it's morally wrong and it needs to stop. In my own state, there were nearly 40,000 documented victims of child abuse and neglect last year alone. That is an appalling epidemic. And yet, there is an equally appalling silence surrounding this ugly truth. Politicians and opinion leaders get all worked up about juvenile crime. That becomes a hot political issue In our state there were 10 young people charged with murder one year. The state's leadership went berserk. There was a legislative and gubernatorial commission. There was new

legislation. There were headlines. There were big stories. There was a new governmental department created. It was a big deal!

The same year, there were 70 children killed by adults. No commissions, no big reports, no new legislation, no new attempt to deal with the problem. Seven times as many kids were killed by adults as there were kids who killed anybody (mostly other kids), and nothing happened. We tend to see kids in too narrow, fragmented and instrumental ways. When society values children, it tends to value them for who they might *become*, and what they might produce, not for the human beings they are right now. Children's lives don't become real and meaningful only at some point in the future. Children's lives happen from the moment they draw breath and happen throughout their years. Those real lives and what happens to them in the here and now is vitally important.

We tend to see kids in too narrow and fragmented terms. To a teacher, a particular child is a student to be taught certain curricular material by a certain date (and to perform well on a certain standardized test). To a physician, that child is a patient to be healed of a particular disease. To a social worker, that child is a case to be managed. To a coach, that child is a player with certain role on the team. On and on. *What we need to do is to see children whole and treat them holistically.* We talk about how it "takes" a village to raise a child", but what I've noticed more and more is that the village envisioned is a village consisting of service providers. I don't think that's what children need. The fundamental need of children is not to be serviced. Rather, they need to be raised. They need to be loved and nurtured. They also need services, but services alone will not make for good childhoods, nor will a strong GDP, nor will fancy schools.

So, you well may be asking, what do I recommend?

1. What I've learned as a child advocate -- that I didn't fully understand and act upon as a rural educator, as a rural entrepreneur or as a rural community developer -- is that it's incredibly important to be deeply involved in broad, unprecedented, seemingly unlikely political coalitions. It is incredibly important to find ways to come together and put aside our personal and professional egos, put aside our narrow organizational agendas, to put aside all of the things which those currently in power use to divide us and keep us marginal , whether it's race, class, geography or heritage. We can win victories worth winning only when we are in coalition. There are different kinds and levels of coalition that serve different purposes. Join them. If there are great ones ready-made for you join, then create them.. Most of the time on most issues, especially those involving major policies or major resources, we cannot win on our own. The good news is that we don't have to fight the good fight entirely on our own.

   In this spirit, I applaud the organizers and planners of this Conference. It is healthy and wise to bring people from different backgrounds, disciplines and perspectives to this Conference. The resulting association will be stronger for its breadth and diversity. We all should support this coming together across the lines that have artificially and counter-productively divided us for too many years. We must build strong and explicitly political coalitions.

2. We need a different vision of the goal than the ones we've been pursuing. What I've learned since becoming an "professional" child advocate is that the fundamental goal worth pursuing is the goal of making our particular local community, our particular region, our particular state or province a better place in which to *be* a child and to *raise* a child. That sounds pretty innocuous. Who's going to argue with that. I would suggest to you, as innocuous sounding as it is, that there is an almost revolutionary message in there. Revolutionary because if we were to change the world in ways so that the places where children are now growing up really were better places to *be* a child and to *raise* a child, almost everything would need to change. That's why I suggest "child well-being" as the fundamental goal, the fundamental standard and the fundamental tool of evaluation for rural school reform, for rural community development and for rural economic renewal.

Consider the familiar example of the canary in the coal mine. A canary would be placed in the shafts because the miners knew that if the canary was alive, the air around them was not immediately dangerous – but, if the canary died, something was terribly wrong and in need of correction right away. *For our communities and for our society, children are the canaries to which assiduous attention must be paid.* If and when we create communities and states and a society that is truly good for children, then we also inevitably we will have accomplished our most crucial educational, economic and community development goals/aspirations. In fact, you cannot build the kinds of places which are good for children without simultaneously achieving the goals for which we have sought directly by pushing for rural school reform, rural economic improvement and rural community development.

Odd and ironic as it sounds, it may be that the *indirect* road is the most sensible and efficient one. In the context of this Conference, the indirect road is the road of fighting for all children's rights and advocating for all children's needs. By organizing in coalitions for children we can begin to broaden the alliance. Child well-being -- the

notion that every child deserves a good, healthy, safe, nurturing childhood -- is one of the few areas of common ground still left to us in today's societies. We've gotten ever better at being fragmented – we've gotten ever better at having the dividing lines between us sharpen and deepen. Advocacy and action on behalf of children has the power to bring people together across the lines which have divided them historically (and very rarely to the advantage of rural and other marginalized people. Advocating for the needs of all children -- and having that be our fundamental collective goal -- will help us finally get over the urban/rural divide.

The older I get and the more I observe the way the world works, it's not urban people and urban places against rural people and rural places. Urban people and urban places are not our enemies. Our enemies are those who would harm children, are those who would put greed ahead of need, are those who would use their powers to support those who are already powerful and well entrenched, instead of giving (as the Australians put it so well) everyone "a fair go" The real divide in our world is not an urban/rural divide. It's a divide between the haves and the have nots. Between the powerful and the marginalized. We need to organize because, collectively, we have a degree of power that we cannot ever have individually or in our own little areas.

Pushing for the rights of all children is a powerful strategy for rural school reform and rural development, because it gets back to a fundamental role of government. Government only has two core roles. One is to maintain law and order for collective safety and security (i.e., its police powers). The other is the parens partiae duty for government to help those who cannot help themselves. If we can establish the primacy of child well-being, then we've made the mother of all "paradigm shifts". We'll be working in a world that is about justice and not only charity. We'll be working in a world in which doing the right thing for rural children is simply part of the fabric of a decent society, and not an act of good will by unusually enlightened, but inevitably temporary, leaders. We can create that world.

3. The final lesson I want to share with you has to do with outcomes. As I've gotten older, I'm more and more interested in accomplishing things, instead of posturing about things. I've become much more interested in winning the fights in which I engage, not just in giving them a good try. The stakes in the work that bring us together here are very high indeed. Thus, we need to be about the business of making sure that a good outcome actually is achieved for the people and communities for whom we struggle.

One final note. Of course, there are rural differences to which we – and the powers that be – must pay heed. The particular ways in which rural health care is provided for those newly-insured children in North Carolina sometimes is necessarily and productively different. I won't insult you by telling you about the values, virtues and variations of rurality – for these are topics that you already understand every bit as deeply as I do. Perhaps I am insulting you in another way (although I sincerely hope not) but suggesting that exclusively rural-focused advocacy and action may be less powerful and less effective in the long run than putting together the coalitions and constituencies for a broader campaign to achieve child well-being. By helping all of our children, we will help not only our rural kids, but also our rural communities and rural economies.

So, that's what I wanted to share with you from my perspective of "going wide." I've moved away from a rural focus in my daily endeavours, but rural people and rural communities never have left my heart.

I will end simply by thanking you for the fine work that you've done, for the extraordinary work that you're doing back home right now and for the even-better work you're going to do in the years ahead. We are each just a link in an endless chain of people trying to honor the life with which we've been blessed by being a blessing to others in return; and, to make the world a better place for our having been in it. I'm honored to be in your company and I thank you for listening to me today.